

## **Central America: rising up to the challenge**

Remarks by Ambassador Francisco Villagrán de León  
at the 15th Annual Western Hemisphere Security Colloquium  
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It is a pleasure to be here today with so many distinguished friends and colleagues, and I thank the Institute for National Strategic Studies of the National Defense University, the Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College, the Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies, the Inter-American Defense Board, the Inter-American Dialogue, and the U.S. Southern Command for organizing this Colloquium and for inviting me to participate again this year.

I think it is extremely valuable to have the opportunity to discuss new developments in hemispheric security, especially with so many dedicated scholars and policymakers. I truly welcome what I perceive to be a willingness to entertain new ideas and new proposals in this area. It is exciting for me personally to represent a country that is responding proactively to its security problems and proposing bold new solutions that we hope will provoke broad-reaching discussions at the hemispheric, sub-regional and bilateral levels. This Colloquium is exactly the kind of dialogue we want to take part in, so again, thank you for inviting me here today.

I want to start by giving you a brief update on what Guatemala and its neighbors in Central America have been doing to fight drug trafficking and other forms of organized crime. These efforts have been going on for several years now under the coordination of the Central American Integration System (SICA).

Last June, as you may recall, an international conference on security in Central America was held in Guatemala, and its outcome was the launch of a new regional security strategy, whose implementation has advanced significantly over the last year. There are four key elements of the strategy:

- Combating crime
- Prevention
- Institutional strengthening, and
- Rehabilitation, reinsertion and prison security.

It is a strategy to deal with transnational organized crime, and therefore it does not address other threats to hemispheric security.

Within this strategy, a number of programs are ongoing or have started in the past year, with support from the United States as well as Colombia, Mexico, Chile, Spain, Germany and Canada, among others. They include programs to prevent youth violence; combat organized crime; interrupt the illicit trafficking of drugs, persons, and weapons; and strengthen institutions responsible for public security and the administration of justice.

Specific examples include a new program funded by Spain aimed at improving coordination between law enforcement agencies and the judiciary. The program provides training for judges, prosecutors, and police chiefs in areas including the implementation of new legislation (e.g., asset forfeiture) and new methods of criminal investigation. The program also gives officials from neighboring countries the chance to know one other and share knowledge and experiences.

In the area of prevention, a new program supported by the European Union has been launched that provides civic education and awareness raising about crime prevention in rural schools, to help keep children safe and away from criminal gangs.

There are other initiatives and programs under way and I will not go into each one of them.

U.S. support is broad and encompasses all the elements of the regional strategy. It includes capacity-building and improved coordination among public security agencies as well as technical cooperation in specific areas such as community policing and model precincts, and prison administration and security. The U.S. has also been supporting judicial reform and efforts to strengthen the rule of law, as well as partnerships with private-sector organizations to develop citizen-security strategies. There is also a wide array of prevention programs, including vocational training programs and other efforts to support at-risk youths.

SICA continues to play a pivotal role and provides a regional platform that facilitates coordination of different agencies in all the Central American countries. SICA however, does not encompass all the efforts under way; public security institutions coordinate among themselves, with support from the United States. Colombia is also playing a valuable role in supporting these institutions.

The OAS is supporting SICA as well as all the countries in Central America in the areas of prevention and rehabilitation (through CICAD) as well as institutional strengthening through evaluations and advice on best practices for government agencies in the area of public security. In Honduras, the OAS is supporting the national commission on reform of the security sector. (Ambassador Adam Blackwell spoke yesterday about other areas the OAS is working in Central America.)

On the ground, there have been clear successes resulting from better coordination among security agencies, particularly in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. This is where U.S. support has been most critical. For example, Guatemalan helicopters

donated by the U.S. and flown by Guatemalan pilots have been working with Honduran law enforcement agents to intercept and seize drug shipments and capture drug traffickers. In Guatemala and Honduras, drug seizures are up significantly, and a number of key drug lords have been detained and have been extradited or are in the process of being extradited to the U.S.

It is clear that Central American countries have the political will to fight organized crime and —with support and better coordination— are improving their capacity to respond to these challenges. It is also true that there are still weaknesses in our countries' judicial and law enforcement institutions. But despite those weaknesses, the United States and other partners are working effectively with Central American institutions while helping to develop and strengthen them. (By the way, the U.S. joined SICA as an observer just last Friday, an important step that has been welcomed by all the Central American countries.) It is important that those who are outside government in the U.S. —for example in think tanks, academia, the media and NGOs— understand the value of these partnerships and recognize the important progress that is being made, instead of focusing only on the shortcomings.

I should say that in order to assess and appreciate the situation in Central America, it is important to look at recent developments from a more general perspective. Countries in Central America are not the only ones facing serious security problems: across Latin America crime is driving down confidence in governments and compromising the authority of the state. Guatemala and other countries in the isthmus are more vulnerable because of their size, their geographic location, their social problems, and their weak institutions.

It is clear that increased cooperation at the hemispheric level is essential. We all recognize that more needs to be done if we are going to succeed in dealing with this new phenomenon of increased criminal activity throughout the region.

The challenges are indeed very serious, and the capabilities to deal with them are limited. Having said that, it's important to keep in mind —as I noted in last year's Colloquium— that throughout the last two decades, Central America has been, for the most part, politically stable. What happened in Honduras two years ago was exceptional. Transitions to democracy have been slow and difficult, as has been the process of institutional consolidation. Except for Costa Rica, the rule of law is weak throughout the region. Social conditions have not changed significantly and remain the biggest challenge for governments and societies as a whole.

On the other hand, open and transparent elections are now the norm, congressional oversight is gradually gaining ground, the media is playing a more focused and critical role in scrutinizing governments, and civil societies are growing and becoming more assertive and more interested in public policy. These are the vital signs of emerging democracies. Simultaneously, trade liberalization has been taking place, the Central

American economies have been growing and opening up, and the process of regional integration has moved forward.

This progress in democratic development and economic integration are what set the stage for the Free Trade Agreement between the U.S. and Central America (CAFTA-DR). The negotiation of CAFTA-DR marked the first time the five Central American governments took part in a trade negotiation as a group, something that happened again in trade negotiations with the European Union.

I find that many people are unaware of the extent of progress in, and the importance of, Central American integration. This process has been steadily bringing down trade barriers and stimulating growth in intra-regional trade, which by the way has helped us weather the international economic turndown. Unfortunately, reduced trade barriers are also something criminal organizations have taken advantage of, as they can now move drugs and other illicit goods through the region without being checked by customs at every border. And of course, they also have developed many unmonitored border crossings.

My purpose in highlighting these developments is to underscore the point that Central American integration—with growing institutional cooperation among the countries—is a positive trend that is also supporting progress in the area of security.

An issue that is of some concern, less so in Central America than in the U.S., is the proper role of the military in the fight against organized crime. Guatemalan society now considers the military to be under civilian control, and all the important political forces share a commitment to keeping it that way. Therefore it should be perfectly acceptable to assign the military specific areas of responsibility, as has been done since the previous Administration. Examples include border security in mostly uninhabited areas, where the police lack specialized training, as well as maritime surveillance, which logically falls under the purview of the region's naval forces. But there are no doubt other areas, and it would be a mistake to exclude the military from international security cooperation. The military's support is temporary and intended to fill a void. It is well known that Guatemala's police forces are weak and unable to cope with the onslaught of organized crime. It will take some years of training and additional resources for them to become an effective force for providing public security. Meanwhile, Guatemala is not the only country that has had to call its military into a supporting role in public security. The situation is similar in Honduras and in other countries. Small countries have to use all the resources they have available in times of grave challenges to their security. These are exceptional circumstances, and everybody understands that the military's role in public security is transitional and requires special guidance, for example, on how to deal with evidence in a crime scene, as well as how to preserve civil liberties or individual rights.

It's important also to recognize that Central America did not bring these security problems onto itself. In spite of its faults and weaknesses, Central America is not a

drug producer. It is a transit venue for drugs and other illicit activities. As *The Economist* reported a year ago, nearly all the world's cocaine is produced in Colombia, Peru and Bolivia, and the biggest consumer of cocaine is the United States. The original shipping route, from Colombia across the Caribbean to Florida, was shut down by the U.S. Coast Guard by the early 1990s, at which point drug shipments detoured to Mexico's Pacific Coast. Now that Mexico has cracked down on trafficking, nearly the entire supply of cocaine destined for the U.S.—some 250 to 350 tons—passes through Guatemala. To establish these new routes, Mexican narco-traffickers have created a new cadre of local Guatemalan drug lords who did not even exist 10 years ago.

So again, Central America would not be in this conundrum if there were not such a huge market for illicit drugs in the U.S. This is where the issue of co-responsibility comes in. Central America, to be sure, is vulnerable and has weak states. But organized crime and drug trafficking are problems for both the region and the United States. They will only go away when drug consumption here in the U.S. is addressed as an integral part of the solution.

Central America is doing its part, should do more, and is already trying to do a better job. It's important to note here that the judicial sector in Central America has already improved significantly since the end of the armed conflicts of the 1980s. But the countries need more support, as well as more intelligence-sharing with the U.S., Mexico and Colombia. We need, of course, better judges, prosecutors, and in general more effective institutions in the judicial and public security realms. We also need to devote more attention and resources to prevention and rehabilitation.

Guatemala's new President, Otto Perez Molina, is committed to the regional strategy for security and to combating organized crime. But he also believes that we must make a serious assessment of what has worked and what has not in the fight against drugs. That is why he has proposed a dialogue about other alternatives for confronting organized crime and drug trafficking, for example, exploring modalities to decriminalize some drugs. Given his background and his experience in dealing with security issues and with public policy responses, President Perez Molina wants to understand well if everything we are doing is going to succeed, and if there are other approaches to dealing with the problem of drugs that may have worked elsewhere.

That is why he raised the subject at the Summit of the Americas in Cartagena last month. It should be noted that President Perez Molina did not ask for the issue of drugs to be included in the formal summit agenda, nor did he suggest that it be mentioned in the final declaration. He understood well that the Summit of the Americas was going to focus on something else. He wanted to raise the subject of drugs in private and informal settings. It was only following consultations between President Santos of Colombia, President Obama, President Perez Molina and other heads of state that they agreed to discuss the issue in the private dialogue held the last day of the summit.

What the heads of state and government decided was to ask the Secretary-General of the Organization of American States to set up a working group to analyze the issue, to review the available scientific data, and to study alternative approaches. These could range from looking at various experiences with regulating the production and consumption of some drugs in other parts of the world to public health and prevention approaches, as well as judicial responses. Guatemala has made at least one specific proposal, which is the establishment of a regional court to deal with the most serious crimes committed by drug traffickers.

The study that comes out of the OAS working group should be presented at the OAS General Assembly in 2013, which will be held in Guatemala (not the next one, to be held in Bolivia next month).

Central America has been able to move forward in promoting regional integration, consolidating institutions, expanding trade, and developing a security agenda, in spite of security problems and in spite of having governments with different political orientations. The challenges facing the region in the area of security are indeed great, yet I do believe the countries can pursue a unified approach to their shared security concerns. I also believe this cooperation will have important benefits in other key areas, including strengthening institutions, promoting the rule of law, and improving other critical conditions for democratic governance.

Democratic governments and stronger civil societies are now the norm throughout Central America. As former CICIG head Carlos Castresana of Spain put it, “the paradigm has changed”: non-state actors—drug traffickers and gangs—are the perpetrators of violence, not the state. Strengthening the state—and effectively employing all the resources it has—must be the ultimate objective of security assistance for Central America, not just to reduce violence and crime but to ensure the survival of democratic governance itself.